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HUELGA, A MILESTONE IN FARM UNIONISM.

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EARLY ATTEMPTS DURING THE 20TH CENTURY TO ORGANIZE FARM WORKERS, TO GAIN WAGE INCREASES, AND TO SECURE EMPLOYER RECOGNITION OF A UNION AS THE WORKERS' AGENT FOR COLLECTIVE BARGAINING FAILED. AN ESTIMATED 380 AGRICULTURAL STRIKES INVOLVED OVER 200,000 WORKERS IN 33 STATES BETWEEN 1930 AND 1948. THE NATIONAL LABOR RELATIONS ACT, ENACTED AS A RESULT OF THOSE STRIKES, IRONICALLY EXCLUDED AGRICULTURAL WORKERS. IN 1965, A STRIKE OF GRAPE-VINEYARD WORKERS IN DELANO, CALIFORNIA, LEAD TO PUBLIC RECOGNITION OF THE NEED FOR LEGISLATION AND SOCIAL WELFARE PROGRAMS DESIGNED TO RELIEVE POVERTY AND IMPROVE THE WORKING CONDITIONS OF FARM WORKERS. A NEW INTEREST IN AGRICULTURAL UNIONISM DEVELOPED FROM LOCAL, STATE, AND NATIONAL ATTENTION, SYMPATHY, AND SUPPORT GIVEN TO THE STRIKERS BY CIVIL RIGHTS GROUPS, LABOR UNIONS, CIVIC ASSOCIATIONS, AND RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS. THE AGRICULTURAL WORKERS ORGANIZING COMMITTEE ORGANIZED BY THE AFL-CIO AND THE NATIONAL FARM WORKERS ASSOCIATION MERGED AS THE UNITED FARM WORKERS ORGANIZING COMMITTEE (UNFWOC) IN JULY 1966 TO PRESENT A SINGLE FRONT FOR FUTURE BARGAINING NEGOTIATIONS AND TO GAIN RECOGNITION FROM 33 GROWERS. IN AN ELECTION AT THE DI GIORGIO CORPORATION FARMS, UNFWOC BECAME THE BARGAINING AGENT FOR GRAPE HARVEST WORKERS. NATIONAL PUBLICITY RESULTED IN LEGISLATIVE CONSIDERATION OF INCLUDING AGRICULTURAL WORKERS IN THE NATIONAL LABOR RELATIONS ACT AND THE FAIR LABOR STANDARDS ACT. EFFECTS OF THE STRIKE HAVE SPREAD TO THE ATLANTIC COAST, FLORIDA, AND TEXAS. THE SUCCESS OF THE DELANO STRIKE COULD STIMULATE NATIONAL UNIONS TO ORGANIZE FARM WORKERS ON AN UNPRECEDENTED SCALE THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY. THIS DOCUMENT APPEARED IN "FARM LABOR DEVELOPMENTS," SEPTEMBER, 1966. (WB)

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HUELGA! A MILESTONE IN FARM UNIONISM .

Irving J. Cohen

Efforts to unionize farmworkers are a product of the Twentieth Century. Until recently, they have all been doomed to failure and, in some cases, violence. In 1933, for example, a strike of grape-vineyard workers in Lodi, California, resulted in cracked heads, community disorganization, and a crop that rotted on the vine. Last fall, 32 years later, grape workers again struck, this time at Delano, California, a few hundred miles down the road. This strike is popularly known as "Huelga" the Spanish word for strike. Many of the objectives of the workers are the same. The growers' position too, is relatively unchanged. But there has been little violence. Although the strike is still continuing, there has been progress. Some employers have recognized the right of unions to bargain for the workers.

The difference between Lodi and Delano marks the distance we have traveled since 1933. Economically, it is the difference between the bottom of the worst depression in this country and the crest of the longest period of unbroken prosperity we have known. Sociologically, it reflects the altered relationship between farm employer and worker. Politically, it mirrors the changed public attitude towards the role of labor unions in public life.

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As the Delano strike mirrors these changes, so too has it brought about changes in public thinking about the labor situation in agriculture. In the past few years, the plight of farmworkers has pricked the public conscience several times, Edward R. Murrow's Harvest of Shame television program being the most notable example. Public concern was directed to the need for legislation and social welfare programs designed to relieve the poverty and improve the working conditions of farmworkers.

In contrast to a passive role and dependence on this form of public assistance, the grape strike, nonviolent in philosophy and patterned after the civil rights movement, affords the grape-harvest workers a more active role of militant self-help. Public acceptance and interest in the grape strike may indicate that the socio-political climate at this time may be more tolerant of nonviolent reforms of this type. Without question, the national interest in La Huelga has endowed it with an importance far out of proportion to either the size of the strike or the narrow local issues involved.

To appreciate fully the significance of this strike, one must be familiar with the history of agricultural unionism in the United States. During the 19th century, unions of farmworkers were almost nonexistent because of the availability of free land in the West; the identification of farmworkers with their employer; economic opportunities in the cities; and the fact that the trade union movement was small and largely restricted to skilled craftsmen. In the early 20th century, the American Federation of Labor made a number of unsuccessful attempts to establish effective local unions of field workers.

These were concentrated largely in California, where agriculture and farm employment were coming under the domination of large-scale, highly specialized farm enterprises. During the same period, the Industrial Workers of the World made the first major attempt to organize farmworkers nationally. Although both efforts failed, they planted the seeds of unionism which bore fruit in a rash of strikes in the 1930's and, to a lesser extent, in the early 1940's.

During the 1930's, depression, government-sponsored crop reductions and acreage control, drought, and technological change added large numbers of displaced farmers to the agricultural labor supply which was already swollen by unemployed urban workers. The rebirth of the agricultural-labor-union movement was marked by renewed organizational efforts by national organizations such as the A.F. of L., the C.I.O., and the Trade Union Unity League. In the South, the Southern Tenant Farmers Union built up a large membership. In addition, numerous organizations, frequently poorly organized and confused, sprang into being only to collapse under minor crises or defeats.

It is estimated that there were over 380 agricultural strikes involving over 200,000 workers in 33 States between 1930 and 1948. California alone accounted for over half the strikes and nearly three-fourths of the strikers. There were seven grape strikes during this period. The most notable was the strike at Fresno and Lodi in the fall of 1933.

This was one of the most violent strikes that ever occurred in California agriculture. Although the strikers had not resorted to violence, their number and threats caused apprehensive local residents to organize vigilante groups. The strike was broken when a "vigilante mob" drove the strikers out of town with guns, clubs, and fists.

Developments in the 1930's took an ironic turn so far as agricultural workers were concerned. The violent suppression of farm-labor strikes led directly to exhaustive investigations by the Tolan and LaFollette Congressional Committees of labor-management relations and of the denial of the civil rights of striking workers. But the remedial legislation that was enacted (the National Labor Relations Act) specifically excluded agricultural work.

Since 1948, there have been numerous attempts to organize farmworkers, to gain wage increases, and to gain employer recognition of a union as the workers' agent for collective bargaining. Most of these efforts failed, largely because of the chaotic structure of the farm job market. The exclusion of agricultural workers from the National Labor Relations Act means that employers are not compelled to recognize union organization, hold representation elections, or submit to arbitration. The growers can often counter strike action by simply ignoring the unions and hiring strikebreakers. For this reason, as well as the many difficulties encountered in organizing farmworkers, the AFL-CIO, although committed to organizing agricultural workers, had only limited success.

By attracting nationwide attention and sympathy and receiving active support from religious organizations, civil rights groups, and local residents, the Delano grape strike has sparked new interest in agricultural unionism.

Striking Unions

Originally two unions were involved in the Delano grape strike. The Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), whose membership in the Delano area consisted largely of workers of Filipino descent, was the first to call a strike of the grape-harvest workers. This union, organized by the AFL-CIO in 1959, was located predominantly in the central valleys. Although unsuccessful in achieving formal or informal recognition, or even much in the way of membership, it supported the series of strikes against the lettuce industry in the Imperial Valley in the winter of 1960-61, and was able to obtain wage-rate increases in 21 of the 92 disputes in which it participated. In May 1965, AWOC called a strike for higher wages for grape-harvest workers in the Coachella Valley, southeast of Los Angeles. Within a week, the growers agreed to the wage demand of 25 cents per box, with an hourly minimum of $1.40. As some of the Coachella Valley workers moved into the Delano area for the fall grape harvest, they demanded the same wage scale they had won in the Coachella strike. When the growers refused, the Delano strike started.

The National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) joined the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee in the strike. Composed largely of local Mexican-Americans, this small independent union was founded about 4 years ago as an offshoot of the Community Service Organization, a civic-political group that had been formed several years earlier. Led by Cesar Chavez, these people decided to start a labor union, because they believed that improved farm labor conditions could not be achieved by a strictly political approach.

Chavez's approach to unionism, however, is broader than the traditional trade union approach that concentrates on "bread and butter" issues. Chavez by no means ignores these issues; they have been combined with a strong social action thrust, somewhat religious in nature. This approach is possible because NFWA membership is largely Mexican-American. A common cultural background, in which the Catholic faith of Mexican rural society is a very important factor, has created a cohesive force lacking in most previous attempts to organize farmworkers.

The NFWA and the AWOC merged as the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC) in July 1966 and received a charter from the AFL-CIO on August 22, 1966. The merger was predicated on the close working relationship between the unions, the mutual desire to eliminate the possibility of future jurisdictional disputes, and the importance of appearing as a single candidate on the ballot in the forthcoming DiGiorgio election.

Strike Objectives

La Huelga originated in September 1965 as a wage dispute, but the principal objective of the National Farm Workers Association and the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee later became recognition as the bargaining agent for the grape harvest workers. As Chavez states,

"Without question, the issue is recognition. We're attempting to do something that has never been done before."

The original target, the wage demand of 25 cents a box, with an hourly minimum of $1.40, that triggered the strike has become secondary.

Union Activities

The Delano grape strike started on September 8, 1965. A sit-in at the housing camp was called by AWOC after the growers had failed to answer the demands for higher wages. AWOC claimed that 1,300 of the 1,500 workers in the group participated in the sit-in. Ten days later, an estimated 1,500 members joined the strike. Although some 33 growers were struck, the main targets of the strikers have been the 10 largest firms which control over two-thirds of the grape acreage. These 10, in descending order of size, are DiGiorgio, Schenley, Caratan, Divicich, Perelli-Minetti, Zaninovich, Mid-State, Dulcich, Bianco, and Lucas.

At first there was no picketing, but when growers began to move in strikebreakers, picket lines were established at the fields, packing houses, and cold storage plants. As the strike progressed, the unions picketed the offices of Schenley and DiGiorgio and set up picket lines at the San Francisco docks. Both farm-labor unions appealed to other unions and nearby communities to prevent the recruitment of strike-breakers. In addition, homes of recruiters of such labor were picketed and strikers followed workers home to try to talk them out of returning.

The most notable effectiveness was achieved away from the grape fields. Teamster and railroad-union members chose to honor the picket lines at the packing houses and the cold-storage plants. In San Francisco, longshoremen refused to load fresh Delano grapes bound for the Far East, and seamen threatened to walk off if the ship carried the grapes.

When it became apparent that this was to be a long strike, the unions urged their members to seek work away from Delano in order to support their families. In response to this suggestion, an estimated 2,500 workers left the area to find work in other crops. But about 500 workers abandoned the strike and returned to work. The growers were proceeding relatively well in the harvest, with the employment of strikebreakers and defecting strikers. The unions and their members, perhaps with the expectation of a short strike, such as the one in Coachella, had started with very limited resources. However, as the strike turned into a long-term struggle and union funds and worker savings were being exhausted, it became obvious that money and outside support were vital. Both unions appealed to other unions, civic groups, and civil rights groups for moral and financial assistance.

Labor unions responded with gifts of food and money. Noteworthy was the pledge by Walter Reuther, President of the United Auto Workers and head of the Industrial Union Department of AFL-CIO, of a Christmas contribution of $5,000 and an additional $5,000 a month for "as long as it takes to win this strike."

Civic organizations, community associations, and civil rights groups not only sent gifts of food and money, but also provided volunteers to man picket lines. Donated food was distributed to strikers' families through a "strike store," and a soup kitchen was established.

At the request of the striking unions, two civil rights groups, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC); church groups; and other unions launched a boycott of all Schenley products. In addition, the public was urged not to buy fresh table grapes produced by growers in the Delano area. The farm unions provided a list of the brand names of Delano growers.

In March, 70 farmworkers and wives left Delano for a 300-mile, 21-day march to Sacramento to gain support for the strike. This march, led by Chavez, dramatized the plight of the strikers and gathered public support. Civil-rights groups, church officials, college groups, unions, and politicians supported the march, with many joining for token walks. Mexican-American communities along the route of the march provided food and lodging for the marchers. When the march ended Easter Sunday on the capitol steps, the primary objectives of focusing national attention on the strike had been achieved.

Perhaps the two most outstanding characteristics of this labor dispute have been the relative lack of violence and the national public support that has rallied behind the unions. This is in sharp contrast to the Fresno and Lodi grape strike of 1933.

The credit for the nonviolent nature of the strike must be shared by the community and the growers as well as the striking unions.

Counter-Strike Activities

During the first few days of the sit-in, growers took no action to combat the strike. However, when they became aware of the seriousness of the situation, they had the strikers evicted from the company housing and out-of-town strikebreakers were moved into two or three of the camps. Armed guards were hired to patrol the fields where the strikebreakers were working. Growers also obtained an injunction limiting picketing to five persons at any one location on some ranches, but when tested by large numbers of pickets, this was found to be virtually meaningless.

On January 12, the DiGiorgio Corporation petitioned for and obtained a temporary order restraining the unions from picketing the docks at San Francisco, Oakland, and Stockton. This temporary court order was dissolved on January 29. King County Superior Court Judge Meridith Wingrove ruled that if farmworkers are exempt from the benefits of the National Labor Relations Act, they certainly must be exempt from its restrictions as well.

On April 6, Schenley Industries, the second largest grape producer in the area, recognized the NFWA as the sole bargaining agent for farmworkers of the firm, without an election, and signed a pact agreeing to negotiate a union contract with the Association. This was the first break in the ranks of the growers. Another break occurred when the Christian Brothers Winery in Napa County voluntarily agreed to negotiate with the union.

DiGiorgio, the largest of the 33 growers struck, then became the main target of union activity. This company proposed an election by secret ballot conducted by the California State Mediation and Conciliation Service to determine whether a majority of its 1,163 workers wished to be represented by a union. The DiGiorgio Corporation agreed to recognize any union that won the election at any facility, and to enter immediately into negotiations with it. In addition, if no agreement was reached within 30 days, the company agreed to submit the unresolved issues to binding arbitration. In return, the DiGiorgio Corporation asked the unions to: (1) refrain from striking, boycotting, or picketing for a full year if they lost the election; (2) agree that there would be no strike or work stoppage during negotiations or during or after arbitration; (3) stipulate that any agreement reached through collective bargaining or arbitration would contain provisions forbidding any strike, boycott, slowdown, or lockout during the harvest season.

The DiGiorgio proposal was based on the argument that the people doing the picketing did not represent the people doing the work. As proof, they cited the fact that the 1965 grape harvest was the largest in California's history with 3,960,000 tons being harvested by 85,000 persons. DiGiorgio reported that at the peak of union activities at harvest time, only 36 out of 700 employees left their jobs. In addition, a new union, the Kern-Tulare Independent Farm Workers Union, composed of nonstriking workers, was formed.

The striking unions rejected the DiGiorgio proposal largely because strikebreakers would be voting in the election and they considered the DiGiorgio pre-election conditions to be "booby traps." The formation of the Kern-Tulare Independent Farm Workers Union provided another obstacle, since it would be included on the ballot, and the striking unions consider it to be grower-controlled. Chavez boycotted a meeting with the California Conciliation Service because of the presence of representatives of this union. Although the pre-vote demands were unsatisfactory to them, the union officials viewed the DiGiorgio action as significant since it at least represented a point from which negotiations could proceed.

Status of Strike

By May, the strike seemed to have reached a temporary impasse. The only new activity was a boycott directed against DiGiorgio and the picketing of a DiGiorgio-owned warehouse in San Francisco. This facility, which employs some 200 workers, suspended operations temporarily until the picket lines were withdrawn.

On June 22, 1966, after 9 months of strike, Schenley Industries and the National Farm Workers Association signed a 1-year contract affecting 450 grape pickers in the Delano area. The pact provided a blanket 35-cent hourly increase, setting the minimum rate at $1.75 an hour. Piece rates are to be adjusted to correspond with this new basic wage. In addition, Schenley agreed to a union shop, with a union hiring hall as the prime source of labor, and a payroll deduction for union dues. Cesar Chavez, director of the union said, "this is a milestone in the history of United States agriculture."

Two days later, on June 24, an election was held at the DiGiorgio Sierra Vista ranch to determine whether the workers employed there wished to be represented by a union and if they did, by which union. The NFWA refused to participate in the election and the Teamsters Union won. The election was then contested by the NFWA. The election was contested by the NFWA on the grounds that it had been "rigged" in favor of the Teamsters. Professor Ronald Haughton of Wayne State University was appointed by Governor Edmund G. Brown to investigate this charge but rather than making a ruling on this he recommended that a new election be held. This being agreeable to all parties, provisions were made for a second election on August 30 in which the NFWA would participate.

Ballots cast on August 30 by nearly 900 employees or former employees of the DiGiorgio Corporation indicated a victory for the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee. (Merger of AWOC and NFWA was chartered by the AFL-CIO in late August.) The official count for the field workers was UNFWOC 530, Teamsters 331, and no union 12. This was apparently the first time an agricultural union had won a representational election to become the collective bargaining agent for a group of agricultural field workers. This election has been a focal point in the strike as smaller growers were expected to follow DiGiorgio's lead and permit elections or simply to accept the UFWOC as the bargaining agent for the grape-harvest workers. As a result of this election the Teamster Farm Workers Union was declared the bargaining agent for the shed workers on the same ranch.

Implications of the Strike

Developments noted in other areas indicate that the effects of this strike are not limited to Delano. The AFL-CIO is readying a full-scale organizing campaign among Atlantic Coast migrant workers. Many Florida crew leaders have reportedly signed with the United Agricultural Workers of America and voted to accept a charter from the International Laborers Union. In Texas, some of Chavez' followers are currently attempting to organize farmworkers in the lower Rio Grande Valley.

On the legislative front, La Huelga was responsible for the Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor hearings in Visalia, Delano, and Sacramento, California, concerning the elimination of the agricultural exclusion from the National Labor Relations Act. Press accounts of the hearings, and reactions of Senators Williams of New Jersey and Kennedy of New York, were largely sympathetic to the striking workers. In Delano, both DiGiorgio and the unions have indicated that they think the National Labor Relations Act and the Fair Labor Standards Act should be amended to include farmworkers and farm employers. Congress recently voted to bring agricultural workers on large farms under the Fair Labor Standards Act for the first time, and while the issues generated by La Huelga were not directly involved in this legislation, the national publicity by the striking grape-harvest workers may have been a factor in its enactment.

The Delano strike has proven to be a catalyst in many ways, but it is too early to evaluate the events at Delano in terms of lasting effect. A lasting victory for the striking unions could further stimulate national unions to organize farmworkers on an unprecedented scale, as well as encourage indigenous efforts at collective action even without the support of powerful national unions.

However, La Huelga has already accomplished several things. It has taken a place along with John Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath and Edward R. Murrow's Harvest of Shame in pointing out inequities in the law when applied to agricultural labor. It has brought national attention to the position of both the farmer and the worker with regard to collective bargaining. It also seems to foretell a further chapter in the social reform now so much a part of the national commitment.